Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve Bear Program Report 2010

"Year of the Brown Bear"



by Christopher Behnke and Tania Lewis

Bartlett Cove Bears

2010 was another fascinating year for bear management and research in Glacier Bay National Park. Bartlett Cove was prime bear habitat early in the summer in May and June but there were curiously few bear sightings during that time. Both black and brown bear activity in Bartlett Cove increased significantly in July and August. A culture of bear-awareness seems to have taken root this year, folks at NPS employee housing and Glacier Bay Lodge housing maintained a high level of awareness for bear attractants, keeping a generally clean camp, and utilizing the fantastic Bartlett Cove and Gustavus garbage recycling and composting facilities.



Mama black bear eating devil's club berries with cub in the Admin. parking lot, Aug. 18, 2010

Black Bears

One family of black bears spent a good part of July and August passing through the Bartlett Cove Developed Area. This female started with three cubs but lost a cub in early August. At least two, probably more, single black bears were also spotted in Bartlett Cove several times. The large cinnamon male seen in previous years passed through once or twice with his usual penchant for standing his ground on the trail. Hot spots for bear sightings and activity in late June/July were the strawberry patches along the road between permanent and seasonal housing. In August black bear sightings became more common around the campground and housing areas as bears fed on blueberries and devil's club.

The great news is that black bears, while in close proximity to people for much of the summer, did not acquire any human food or trash in the park, and did not approach any humans or act aggressively, despite the presence of cubs. Sadly, an August report of a large black bear feeding in an unsecured garbage/burn pile in Gustavus reminds us that, for all of our best efforts and successes in the Park, we are still intimately interconnected with our neighbors in Gustavus. Bears with associations between people and food know neither limits nor borders.



Brown bear on harbor seal carcass in Bartlett Cove near Coopers Notch, Aug. 9.

Brown Bears

Brown Bears were commonly reported in Gustavus from the 1920's through the 1950's, but were essentially absent in these areas from the 1960's through the late 1990's. In 2010, for the first time in over 50 years, brown bears were repeatedly sighted along the Bartlett River, in Bartlett Cove, and Gustavus.

Remote cameras placed on carcasses near the Park Boundary and on the Bartlett River first detected brown bear presence on April 2 and May 3. A single brown bear was observed in Bartlett Cove on June 28 and again on July 2. A brown bear later charged an NPS Fisheries Biologist conducting an angler survey on the Bartlett River in late July, and was successfully

deterred by bear spray. The trail was closed temporarily until the GLBA Bear Team determined that there was no carcass involved and reopened the trail, leaving an advisory in place. In August a brown bear was seen feeding on a harbor seal carcass on the beach south of the campground. The area was closed until the carcass was consumed.

Brown bears were also common this summer in many places in Gustavus. A subadult male was shot in July, giving the bear management team an unfortunate chance to work with Alaska State Troopers and ADF&G. The bear carcass is currently soaking in a crab pot in Bartlett Cove to clean the skeleton for education and display. Another brown bear was later seen feeding on berries near the library, the Salmon River meadows, and other locations around town.

Backcountry Bears

2010 had a record low number of backcountry bear incidents. Curious bears approached campers on three occasions, two of which resulted in minor property damage while one party successfully defended their gear with bear pepper spray.



Curious bear investigating campsite at Gloomy Knob, June 1.

2010 Incidents

6/1/2010	Gloomy Knob	Curious brown bear ate a camp chair.
7/27/2010	Bartlett River	Brown bear charged park employee, bear sprayed.
8/4/2010	East Arm, Goose Cove	Brown bear pawed tent, was deterred successfully.
7/31/2010	Gloomy Knob	Curious brown bear bit a camp chair and a camera.

Closures and Advisories

Scidmore Cut Beach Closure 5/12 - present

Scidmore Cut was closed to travel and camping because the whale carcass presented a potential conflict between bears seeking to feed on the carcass and park visitors seeking to view the bears. This closure is ongoing.

Gloomy Knob Advisory 6/8 - present

Two incidents at Gloomy Knob on June 1 and July 31 resulted in an ongoing VIS advisory to avoid camping in this area.

Bartlett River Closure 7/28 – 8/2

The Bartlett River was closed temporarily after a brown bear charged an NPS employee. The Bartlett River is currently open with a standing advisory of brown bear activity in place, with informational markers at the trailheads.

Coopers Notch Closure 8/9 – 8/26

The beach trail past the Bartlett Cove Campground to Coopers Notch was closed for several weeks due to a brown bear feeding on a seal carcass. The trail was reopened once the carcass was no longer an attractant.

Ongoing Research Projects

Black and Brown Bear Distribution.

We are finishing a 2-year project aimed to determine the distribution of brown and black bears in the park. Bear species presence at selected study sites is determined by visual observations, tracks, or genetic identification of bear hair. Black bears appear to be most closely associated with forest cover while brown bears have been documented in every part of Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve.



Bear hair on a rub tree augmented with barb wire to increase sample quality, Reid Inlet, Aug.4.

Brown Bear Genetic Study

We are also wrapping up summer data collection for a landscape genetics analysis of brown bears. The goal is to determine the genetic relatedness of brown bears along the shoreline of the park and the level of mixing that occurs between different geographic areas such as the outer coast and Glacier Bay. The key to this analysis is bear hair, so we have spent a good portion of the summer crawling along bear trails in Glacier Bay, Dundas Bay, Excursion Inlet and the outer coast.

Vessel Approach Study

We are also continuing to opportunistically study brown bear vessel disturbance trends. Compiling data on bear reactions to vessel proximity will help to set guidelines for appropriate bear-viewing distances.

Scidmore Cut Whale Carcass.

A major bear highlight for the summer has been the humpback whale carcass that washed up on shore in the West Arm at Scidmore Cut in early May. The carcass has been the subject of a scavenger study, beginning on the 19th of May. This major influx of calories into the ecosystem has been a rich opportunity to observe and analyze a remarkable concentration of bears, eagles, ravens, crows, and wolves. A time-lapse camera and a motion-activated camera have provided fascinating photos, giving the Glacier Bay Bear Team exciting data to analyze. A paper between Tania Lewis and Diana Raper of Oregon State University is currently being developed. The carcass has also been a chance for visitors to observe multiple bears and other wildlife species interacting in an unusually concentrated communal feeding aggregation.



Brown bear feasting on delicious rotting whale flesh at Scidmore Cut, Aug. 27.



Six bears and a wolf at the whale carcass recorded on remote camera, Aug. 26.

Bear Management Intern

Kyle Pinjuv, an Evergreen College graduate student, joined the Bear Team for a month in July. Kyle participated in bear research and management trips, entered a copious amount of data, and conducted an independent survey of over 70 Gustavus residents to help gauge the communities developing perceptions and knowledge of brown bears. His results showed that Gustavus residents wanted more information about brown bears, which led to an NPS and ADF&G community presentation and discussion at the library in late August.

What would make you more comfortable with brown bears in town?	Number of responses
Community education	34
Nothing	11
Better enforcement	7
Kill the bears	6
Better garbage/property management	4
Relocate bears	3
Community communication	2
Bear management staff	2
Access to bear spray	1

Results from a portion of a Gustavus community survey by Kyle Pinjuv, August 2010.

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Thanks from the Bear Team 2010: Tania Lewis, Kyle Pinjuv, and Christopher Behnke.